What's the best Linux desktop environment?

In Depth: Examining the usability of Gnome and Unity

**Operating systems News **

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After trawling through its 2.x series for more than eight years, Gnome introduced the radically different 3.0 which completely revamped the desktop and introduced new paradigms to bolster usability.

Gnome pitched Gnome Shell, an integral part of the new desktop, as a visually-oriented interface that would make navigating windows easier, and quickly get you to your favourite apps and documents. On release, though, long-time Gnome users were dumbstruck by its unconventional approach – it completely tossed out the workflow which they had come to rely on.

Following the release, and its subsequent inclusion in Fedora 15, Gnome developers tried to justify the changes. It wasn't enough to convince Linus Torvalds. He described Gnome 3 as an "unholy mess" and announced his departure to Xfce.

Six months down the line, we have Gnome 3.2. In addition to some new features, this release also fixes some of the most annoying bugs that often popped up in various mailing lists, forums and reviews. The highlight is its tighter integration with online services.

The new Gnome Online Accounts, which show up in system settings and the user menu, let you sign in to your online accounts and turn services you wish to share data from into offline apps. So signing in and enabling Chat configures the Empathy IM client. Similarly, you can sync your online mail, contacts, and calendar with the Evolution PIM.

At the moment, you can add only Twitter and Google accounts, but when the feature was announced it was suggested it would support several other online services, such as Flickr and Facebook.

To bring web services such as Google+, Identi.ca and Twitter closer to the desktop, Gnome 3.2 has equipped its default Epiphany browser to save them as web apps. Just navigate to the service and go to File > Save As Web Application in Epiphany. The service can then be launched from the Overview mode, or pinned to the dash.

Web services now run as apps, which means they run within an instance of the browser but without the browser's GUI elements. If one instance crashes it won't affect the others, and if you click on a link within a web app, it opens in a separate full-fledged browser window.

Gnome 3.2 also has two new apps that take advantage of Online Accounts. Gnome Contacts enables you to search for and edit contacts, whether they're stored locally or within one of the configured online services. Similarly, Gnome Documents will help you find documents of all types from within your file-system or an online docs repository, such as Google Docs.

Another handy feature is Sushi, the new Nautilus file previewer. It can be called on-demand to preview all types of files. However, Gnome Documents and Sushi aren't available on the official Gnome 3.2 live CD.

There are lots of other enhancements, some more visible than others, and most of have been worked on by students at Google's Summer of Code.

How usable is usable?
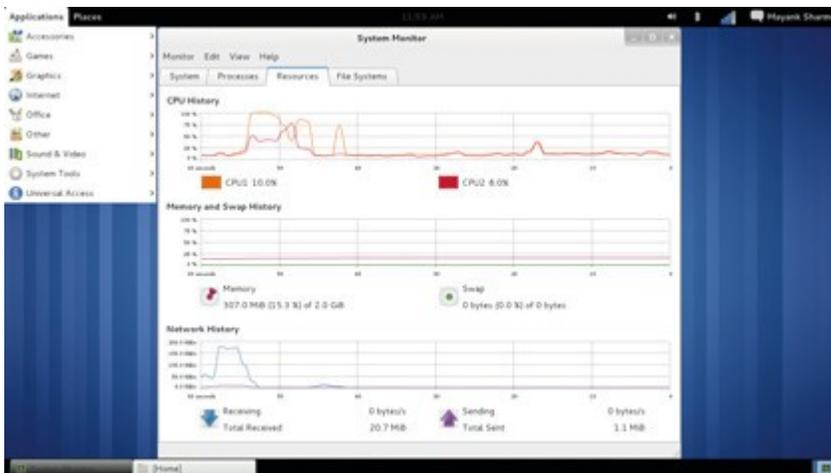
When Gnome 3 was launched in April, enhanced usability was touted as the main reason for the dramatic changes. Since usability is a personal experience, we invited a bunch of people, from newbies to power users, to share their experiences with 3.2.

Newbies said that the first thing that struck them was the lack of any desktop icons and the minimal amount of text; and almost everyone was foxed by the lack of Minimise and Maximise buttons. **Joseph Guarino, CEO of Boston-based IT solution company Evolutionary IT, and a long-time Gnome user in a corporate environment, said he was also "perplexed and annoyed" by the missing buttons.**

The Gnome developers argue that the buttons have no place in the new layout and point out that if a user wants to see a particular window, they can just head to the Activities overview.

At first, almost everyone moaned about the lack of any desktop icons, and the fact that you couldn't right-click on the desktop. Unsurprisingly, those who hadn't used Gnome 3.0 were also confused to find they couldn't create desktop shortcuts or folders.

Many users didn't like the default Activities overview of all the open windows, and this was particularly true of those who went there to launch apps. Most users stick to a few regularly-used apps, and after a while they figured out how to pin them on the Dash. This is also how most power users work with the desktop.

Ben Werdmuller, CTO of latakoo, said: "I'm a visual person and really hate dropping down to the command line. But I'm also a web developer, and my Gnome desktop is optimised to get me to the servers I need to get to, as quickly as possible. I've set up a bunch of shortcuts to various control panels. Aside from that, my shortcuts to NetBeans and Chromium are pretty much all I need."

Those with a Google account appreciated the Online Accounts feature and its integration with Empathy and Evolution Calendar, and the new Contacts and Docs feature. None of them noticed Save As Web Application, but did make use of it once they were shown how.

Most users didn't notice Recently Used directories in Nautilus, but power users appreciated being able to bring deeply nested directories in another filesystem onto the same page as higher-level directories on the local filesystem.

Touchscreen laptop users liked the large icons and well-spaced menu entries, and didn't really mind the missing Minimise and Maximise icons which would have interfered with the Close button.

Experienced Gnome users headed straight for the Accessibility icon in the System Status area and enabled the on-screen keyboard on the touchscreen laptop. The on-screen keyboard in Gnome 3.2 looks much better; it's quite responsive and pops up whenever a text field is selected – whether in a text editor, the terminal, a browser or even in the Overview when searching for an app – and auto-hides when it isn't required.

Everyone made a favourable note of the notifications, be it from the system or a message from someone in IRC. They also liked the options when connecting a removable device.

Some couldn't figure out how to unmount devices until they headed to the Activities menu, which brought up a tray at the bottom of the screen.
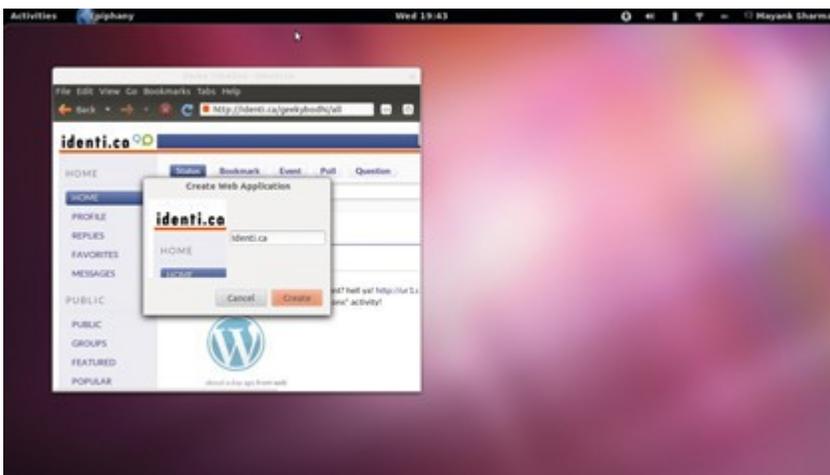
Step-by-step: Adding a website as a web application

1. Navigate to the site
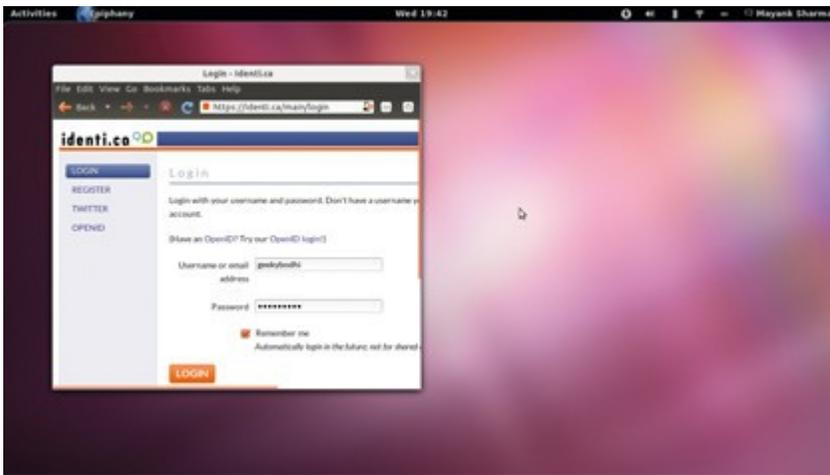
Launch Epiphany and head to the website you want to create the app for. Remember to save your login details because the apps share the browser's cache and settings.

2. Save the web app

Log in and click on File > Save As Web Application in Epiphany. This will use the top left of the website for its icon, and pick up a name for the app, which you can edit.

3. Launch from Activities
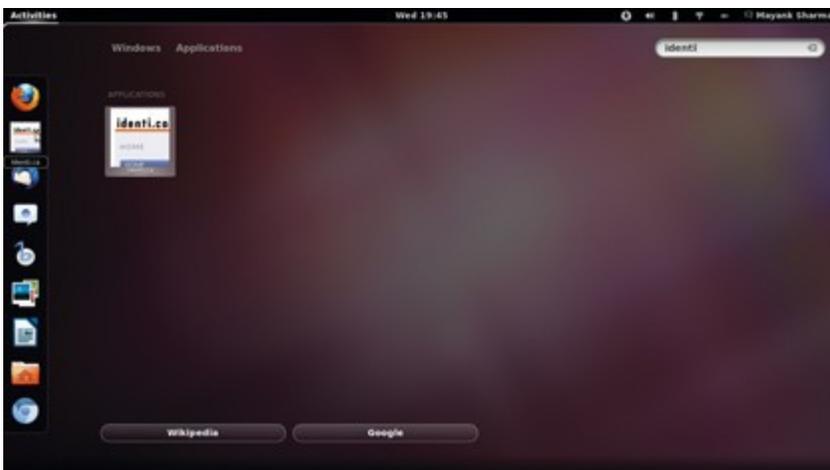
When it's been created, the web app shows up as a regular app and can be launched from Activities >

Others. Like any other app, you can also pin it to the Dash.

Entire article can be found at:

http://www.techradar.com/news/software/operating-systems/what-s-the-best-linux-desktop-environment--1045280?artc_pg=1